

Anthropocene Writing: Ocracoke 2159 and Speculative Ethnography

by

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Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University

Submitted to The Honors College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts.

May, 2019

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Abstract

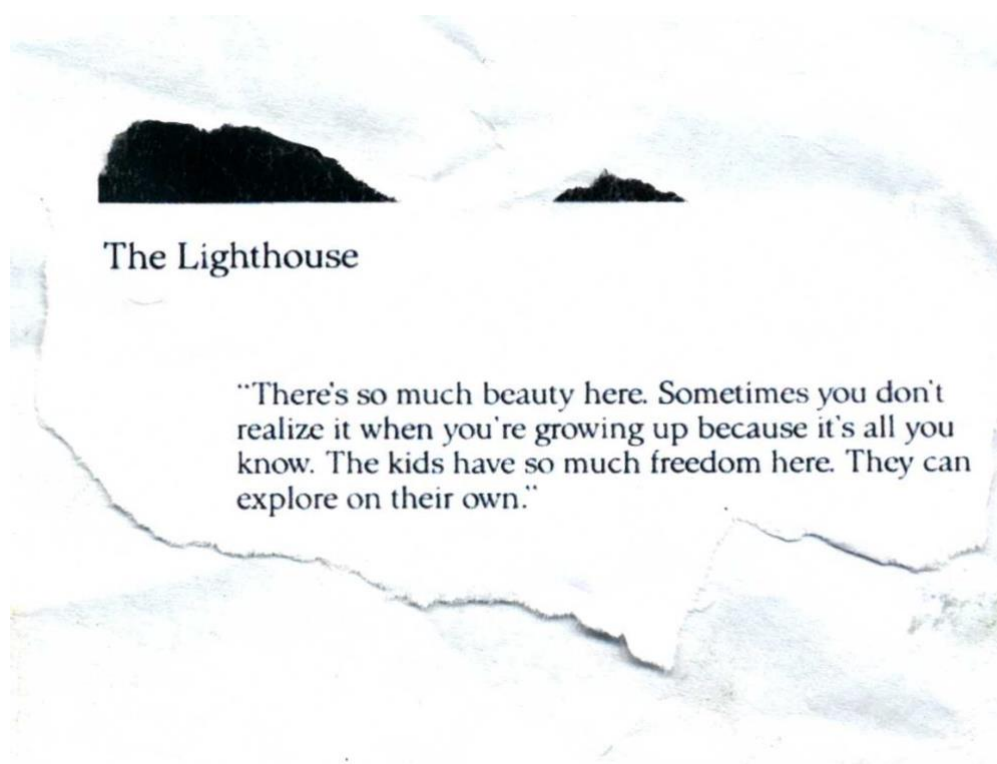
This thesis explores modes of writing and research appropriate for the Anthropocene, when humans and their culture are rendered precarious by other-than-human processes. Fictocriticism and science fiction, and philosophical schools of thought, object-oriented ontology and phenomenology, are given special attention. I argue that anthropology is a constitutive and poetic space, rather than an objective science of culture, and that creative writing is indispensable for writing in and about the Anthropocene because it has the capacity to imagine novel futures and ways of being. Embedded in the text is a short story, which speculates about life on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina, between the years 2059 and 2159.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Appalachian State Anthropology department for facilitating an intellectually rich environment in which I have been able to give myself over to the study of anthropology in all of its poetry. Specifically, I thank Dr. Jon Carter for providing endless guidance and support, for believing in me, and for encouraging me to be tenacious. I thank Dr. Diane Mines for introducing me to phenomenology and for explaining structural linguistic so well, and for teaching me that poetry and storytelling are paramount for ethnography. To Joseph Bathanti, I thank you for inspiring me and many others with your poetry, and for responding with warmth when I came to you freshman year. I would also like to thank my father for giving me the magic of Ocracoke. I think of you, and I think of all the salt water in the world.

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(Ehringhaus 1988, 10)

Situating the Anthropocene

"This is a new condition: now the colonizers are as threatened as the worlds they displaced and destroyed when they took over what they called terra nullis."

-Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (2018, 3)

In 2000 Nobel Prize winning chemist Paul Crutzen published a paper arguing that the Holocene epoch ended recently, and that we are now in a new epoch marked by human augmentation of the earth called the Anthropocene (Denny 2017, 6). With these changes, the global human population found itself in danger of a sixth mass extinction (Steffen et al 2011, 843), which indigenous peoples have already felt in force (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 2). "The one-world world," is composed of colonizers, extractivists, and those who privilege science over non-Western epistemologies; perpetrators of violence in the Anthropocene (3). As an alternative to the one-world world, which does violence to all lifeworlds and the earth, anti-positivist and anti-capitalist forms of speculation and research have developed across the humanities, including in creative writing and anthropology. Anthropologists increasingly attend to the agency of non-human materialities and imagine entangled and plural worlds in which science and development no longer have hegemony over forms of knowing and being such as animism and magic (3-4). Pushed to their limit, anthropologists as anti-positivists endeavor not only to understand the world, but to make and change it (McLean 2017, 152). For some, science fiction becomes a model for anthropological world making because it simulates possible non-violent and non-anthropocentric worlds.

In the wake of the Second World War, political and economic development increased at an unprecedented rate and colonial relationships became ill-defined as

colonized groups began to assert their sovereignty and autonomy (Clifford 1988, 6).

According to climate scientists Steffen et al (2007, 617), the global economy grew fifteen-fold in the post-war juncture, and the human population doubled in the following fifty years. This growth marked the beginning of stage two of the Anthropocene epoch, referred to by climate experts as “the Great Acceleration” (617). The Anthropocene concept implies that human impact on the environment has reached a scale that is evident in earth’s strata, and that climate change is steering patterns of nature (Steffen et al 2011, 843). Scientists predict that these forces will lead to the sixth major extinction in earth’s history (843). The nuclear fallout following the Second World War and nuclear testing in the 1950s and 1960s left nucleotides in the geologic record, and some have argued that this period was the definitive beginning of the Anthropocene epoch (Denny 2017, 12). While the stratigraphic impacts of human activity has yet to reach “a golden spike”—a uniform imprint across the lithosphere—such impacts have begun to develop and will increase over time (13).

Atmospheric carbon dioxide began proliferating after the industrial revolution in Great Britain in the 1800s, when coal-powered steam engines were first developed. Fossil fuels, formed from decaying plant and animal matter, create massive amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere when burned (90). This gas continues to be the primary driving force of global climate change (11). Fossil fuels are the cheapest available power sources, and the dirtiest. Eighteen pounds of coal are burned per day for each American citizen, and one pound of coal produces over three pounds of carbon dioxide (90). This excessive production of carbon dioxide has led to global sea-level rise and the acidification of oceans (13).

Along with the incipient phase of acute global climate change and stage two of the Anthropocene, shifting colonial relationships in the post-war juncture would lead to the disruption of colonial discourses in Western research (Clifford 1988, 6). Clifford argues that in anthropology, ethnographers, whose work was premised on a stable relationship between self and other, grappled with what they perceived to be a loss of purity in non-industrial life worlds (14). “A whole structure of expectations about authenticity in culture... is thrown into doubt,” writes Clifford (14). The refuse of colonial technology was scattered in previously colonized landscapes (14-15). Cultural identity in the twentieth century could no longer be continuous with timeless tradition (14). Individuals and groups “improvise local performances from (re)collected pasts, drawing on foreign media, symbols, and language” (14). This schism in stable colonial relationships rendered classic ethnographic methods and epistemologies problematic and obsolete, and as a response to this changing relationship between academic discourses, the power structures in which they were embedded, and the previously objectified “other,” the academy entered into a period of self-reflection, and non-Western and subaltern voices added their voices to a polyvocal post-colonial discourse.

The cultural fragmentation of the twentieth century was at once perverse and sublime, according to James Clifford, producing both filth and novelty, bricolage, pieces, death, and novelty (15). Clifford argues that Claude Levi-Strauss captured the essence of this moment best in *Tristes Tropiques*, part ethnography part travel log, in which he grapples with feelings of loss and nostalgia over the modernization of Brazil’s interior region. Levi-Strauss develops a master-theory for understanding the tensions that give meaning to cultural practice and sociality. Structuralism was born out of a reaction to post-

war politics, including complications in the French Communist Party, involving the 1956 French occupation of Algeria (Wilcken 2010, 236). The party suffered damage to their credibility, and young intellectuals dissented and went in search of a new intellectual paradigm (237). “Levi-Straussian structuralism rushed into the ensuing ideological vacuum...except that structuralism, as a detached, abstract science of culture, was itself a kind of vacuum,” writes Patrick Wilcken, Levi-Strauss biographer (237). In *Tristes Tropiques* Levi-Strauss at once addresses the encroachment of the modern world into Brazil’s backcountry, and the perversion of once isolated worlds at large. He shaped a theoretical school that sought to make sense of the precarity of indigenous lifeways with which he was faced.

Levi-Strauss’ project, abstracted in equations and diagrams, would aim to determine the basic structure of cultural and social life. It can be read as an attempt to make sense of the disappearance and augmentation of cultural worlds that were threatened by novel political and economic processes of globalization and development. In *Tristes Tropiques*, Levi-Strauss formulates a theory of culture which he develops further in his 1962 *The Savage Mind*. Levi-Strauss believed that structural relations in linguistics could be applied to social life, and he analyzed hundreds of South American myths, cultural groups, and art forms to find their “deep structure” (Brenner 2017, 303). For example, in the section “Caduveo” in *Tristes Tropiques*, Levi-Strauss writes about facial tattooing among the Mbaya, and theorizes that the basic function of facial art is to resolve a dilemma. The Mbaya feel as if they belong to both nature and culture, and they detest being a part of nature. Therefore, the basic tension is between nature and culture. Levi-Strauss reads their abhorrence toward procreation and their practice of infanticide as manifestations of those feelings

(Levi Strauss 1992, 188). As an example of Levi-Strauss' diagrams, the "Totemic Operator" in *The Savage Mind* is a multi-dimensional mathematical function which Levi-Strauss created to analyze the meaning of clan associations with certain animals. This structure would determine the relationship between an individual and the cosmos (Levi Strauss 1966, 152).

Academics such as Clifford Geertz, writing in the 1970s, departed from the structuralist theory of culture. Rather than trying to reestablish order out of disorder and diminished culture difference in the post-colonial moment, Geertz advocated for ethnography that was interpretive and semiotic (1973, 5). For him, ethnographic texts are always imperfect interpretations of the "second or third order" (15). Ethnography is always part fiction because it is "something made" (15). It is an extrapolation from first order (native) experience (15). Geertz' critique of structuralism prefigured the post-modern moment in the discipline. This moment is marked by a critique of grand narratives such as liberation and progress through the sciences, and the development of universal knowledge (Sarup 1993, 132). It is in light of the development of anthropology from a colonial science to a self-reflective discipline, which now has more affinities with the humanities than positivist science (McLean 2017, x), that ethnographic authority, and by extension, processes of writing, evolved and developed. Prior to the 1950s, the possibility of positive description of stable cultural worlds was the grand narrative in ethnography, and following Geertz, ethnographers in the 1970s and 1980s explored new forms of representation. Geertz was concerned that in structuralism, participant observations are transmuted into textualized form (Clifford 1988, 39), into fieldnotes, and then into an "autonomous" form, which erases the voice of the informant (39). In these second and third order

representations, informants lose their authorship, and the anthropologist usurps authority (39). Before the post-modern moment, “The dialogical, situational aspects of ethnographic interpretation [tended] to be banished from the final representative text,” writes Clifford (40). “The actuality of discursive situations... [were] filtered out” (40). Following the post-modern critique, ethnographers moved away from writing about “the experiences and interpretations of a circumscribed ‘other’ reality,” and approached ethnography as a “constructive negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects” (41). “Every use of *I* presupposes a you, and every instance of discourse is immediately linked to a specific, shared situation: no discursive meaning, then, without interlocution and context” (41). In summary, the post-modern turn marked a shift in the consciousness of ethnographers. They began to see their work as a political endeavor “in a power-laden field” (42), and therefore, novel forms of writing became necessary so as not to erase authorship of informants.

Now, in the indeterminate space somewhere between the third phase of the Anthropocene and the sixth mass extinction, anthropologists must once again grapple with new forms of writing and representation that will prove useful for addressing the social and cultural changes coproduced with climate disaster. This paper asks, what kind of writing is appropriate for the Anthropocene, a crisis prefigured by Western concepts of knowing and being? With the sixth major extinction looming, the death of innumerable species of flora and fauna, and global sea level rise, we are at a historical juncture of change in the wake of the Second World War. How might anthropologists approach this looming historical juncture? Like Levi-Strauss’ development of structuralism during the unprecedented changes experienced by pre-industrial societies post-war, and the post-

modern/post-structural critique that followed, anthropological analysis and theory is adapting to the changes of the Anthropocene. Many thinkers are addressing the eminent climate disaster, from Donna Haraway, Marisol de La Cadena and Mario Blaser, to Stuart McLean, whose work I will examine.

Deathfloat Season



Flood Tide at the Lighthouse

(Ehringhaus 1988, 67)

Introduction: Ocracoke 2159

This story is about life on a floating island after the earth is completely submerged by rising sea-levels. The portion of the story in italics is the text of a journal in which memories of dry land are preserved. It is the sacred text. The “Wave” hit dry land in 2059, and the portion of the narrative that takes place the floating island is set 100 years later.

The main character’s experience is based upon learning the secrets of the sacred text. This text was left by the first inhabitant of the floating island, “grandmother,” who escaped the Wave on a boat. It was her journal, and in it she cataloged memories of Ocracoke before the flood. The main character becomes obsessed with the text, and with life on dry land. He trains as the apprentice of a shaman figure of ambiguous gender named Pelican, who keeps the sacred text in their shelter. My character learns about Pelican’s attempts to preserve Ocracoke’s history, and they practice a sort of cult religion.

The religion has to do with mustangs that appear in constellations in the sky. These mustangs open channels of communication between the spirits of the Ocracoke dead and the shamans who live above. When the stars are hidden, a layer of jellyfish appear on the sea, and block the shaman from connecting with the spirits of the dead below. When the mustangs appear in the sky in the form of constellations, the jellyfish clear, and the shamans can see and hear the dead animals below the surface again. The shamans coax the stars out by building sculptures of the mustangs.

June 2059. Entry 1.

My watch tells the date. It’s been four months and I can’t believe I’m still alive. Goddamn sick of everyone. I found this journal where objects float up at the center lake. Sun dried. A U.S.

Navy ship came by and shot at us. Our first visitors since the flood. No relief. We all assume it must have been worldwide, as was projected. Nothing to do but fish so I'm going to write. Why am I even bothering to write? I should drown myself. I should drown myself I should drown.

When the Wave hit, I made it to the boat and mobs of swimming bodies disappeared beneath it. The water lifted our boat and we were washed into the street. I tried to reach over the edge and save those who hadn't made it. Pieces of wood clobbered the drowners. I had trouble seeing through the rain. I squinted my eyes and held one hand over them. Waves hit us. Cars washed past. A dog disappeared under the current. I saw arms waiving from rooftops. Soon the houses would be completely submerged. The boat driver yelled, "Let's take them with us!" She pointed up toward a line of houses. A couple and two families jumped into the boat from roofs. The motor strained under the added weight. We were carried upward with the rising tide, and I watched as the lighthouse got shorter and shorter.

We tied off the crisis boats to the lighthouse after the torrent subsided when its top was still visible. The water level continued to rise. Bodies floated up and the lighthouse disappeared below the boats. We survivors were left with an aquatic world. Nothing but a seascape littered with the dead and refuse of a drowned world. This goddamn place. Objects bubbled up. Pieces of houses, horse carcasses, trees. We folded the boat seats into a platform that functioned as a communal bed. During the night it was difficult to sleep. Surface bound objects bumped against the boat bottom. Nights were black. Storm clouds and no stars. I looked over the edge, to see if the bumping might be my father's corpse. The corpses were dark red. Their skin had

been shredded off by sand circulating in the vortex like sandpaper. The flood waters never went down.

The stench was unbearable. Bodies on the surface and refuse in a giant patch. We threw up several times per day. The crisis boats revolved around the lighthouse. I counted one revolution each time we passed a green kayak, tangled in the anchor ropes that disappeared into the water. Revolutions took hours. I thought the boat must look like the second hand on a clock. Boats colliding. We lived on rations for a month. So much material had gathered in the patch that people began to venture onto it and fish. We were sick of being with each other. It smelled, and no one could shit in private. Everything is changing. People crying, and others yelling to be quiet. The trash island is a refuge, better than the boat. We can walk. Ocracoke had reemerged in fragments. When I set foot on the patch for the first time I stepped from board to board toward its center, where I found a circular lake where things bubble up. It was expanding, gaining material and widening out.

The entries above are from the first healer's journal, our sacred text. It has been over a hundred years since the Wave drowned Ocracoke, and I spend most of my time with the colony on Float Patch. That is, when I'm not in Ocracoke village on the seafloor. The trash island is one mile long and its width varies in sections. We keep a path cleared around its edges so we can exercise. It winds through hills of plastics and trash. There are two large structures, the fishing compound, where sea creatures are harvested and kept on salt, and the tower dock, where our one hundred and five residents relax, watch theatre, and fish in the evening. The other structures on the trash island are clumped together in

neighborhoods. One or two room shelters made from driftwood and bones. I live with Pelican in a shelter on the edge of the Patch, and I'm finishing my training as their apprentice. Pelican is the healer and intermediary between spirits of the drowned world and the inhabitants of Float Patch.

Our sacred text came from Pelican's grandmother. It holds the last essences of dryland. In the 1500s a Spanish galleon wrecked off the coast of Ocracoke and hundreds of mustangs splashed in the waves, kicking to shore. They lived on the Island for six hundred years until the Wave hit, roaming thirteen-mile beach, the sacred place. It extended from the lighthouse to the ferry dock on the North end. Ocracokers outlawed the sky towers, paved roads, and industries to build there, and the mustangs were the last wild things in North Carolina. We use the trash, the only surviving material from dryland, to make horse sculptures and other elements. People say that building dryland on Float Patch makes the mustangs appear in the stars, and when they do, the death float clears. Then, the horses can throw their reflection into the sea and bring the spirits of the wild things alive again. I never really believed in the horse spirits, but after training with Pelican, I spend all my time in their presence. The tower dock is shaped like the original 1823 Ocracoke light, and it is our greatest sculpture. It stands seventy-five feet tall and has a platform for fishing, and another for Pelican's performances.

During last death float season, I fell from the tower dock one evening after work at the fishing compound. Underwater, the mustangs appeared. I denied it for a time, but I no longer have any doubts. This changed the course of my life. The death float had lasted too long, and the spirits of the drowned world were fading from the intermediary. A thick layer

of jellyfish extended to the horizon on all sides. They were light blue and gloopy in the salt water. We prayed and made elements to the mustangs in the sky for weeks. Still, no sign of clear water. After making a fishing hole in the death float, I rigged my pole, climbed the tower dock, and let the line drop to the ocean floor, the only place where big fish still survive. Something took the bait. The end of my pole began bending down. The tip made a cracking sound. The fish fought and jerked the line, and in a single motion I found myself upside down, falling toward the gloop. I clawed and kicked my legs, trying to pull myself back to the patch. Weighed down by hundreds of jellies, I couldn't breathe or see. I inhaled one and it got stuck in the back of my throat. I heard voices yelling above. Black spots appeared in the center of my vision. I was stung so badly I couldn't move. My body went numb. I felt myself floating downward. I looked toward the surface. A horse galloped upside down along the underside of the death float.

My arms and legs were green. The healer had wrapped my body in seaweed. It smelled like rotten fish. The inside of the shelter was blurry. Dark patches in the middle of my line of sight. In the periphery jars of seahorses sat on upturned buckets. I leaned forward and the dry seaweed made a cracking sound, leaving bits of green on the floor around the bed. Pelican nursed me back to health, and for weeks I watched them do spirit work. They directed offerings to the mustangs in the sky, mapped the stars with the astrolabe, stared at the sea, brought me water from the desalination machine, and fed me salted fish.

While recovering in Pelican's shelter, I told them about my vision. They began rubbing us both down with salt crystals and building horse sculptures. "The horses are near," they said. I learned to use the astrolabe, the only tool with which we can tell time.

Pelican's grandmother stored it in the boat, and it was passed down through generations. It has two circular metal plates, one which Pelican aligns with the sun to determine its altitude, and the other which aligns with the stars to determine the time of year. In the evening Pelican carried it outside. The green shower curtain blew in the wind, and I could see through the doorway. Pelican aligned the astrolabe with the horizon and looked up. "Nothing!" they would yell. This went on for weeks. There were other problems. The solar panels on the desalination machine were wearing out, and we were low on water. There were ten cases of malaria that death float season. Pelican said we used to have chloroquine. Malaria patients sometimes stumbled into the shelter hallucinating. Pelican made announcements every day. They wanted the islanders to continue making elements for the mustangs in the sky. Upon Pelican's command, the yeller would mount the tower dock at all hours of the night, yelling things like "THE MUSTANGS ARE NEAR. YOU WILL BUILD ANOTHER HERD ON THE SOUTH END," or "THE SALT COMPOUND HAS BEEN REPLINISHED. BRING BUCKETS. BEFORE DAWN YOU MUST SPREAD IT AROUND YOUR SHELTER." Horse sculptures everywhere. Their bodies were made from plastic bottles and jugs, which float well and are our most abundant flotsam. They stood in herds along the footpaths, between mounds of trash, and on hills of refuse. I looked up at the tower dock. A black one stood on its top, dark against the cloudless sky. Pelican covered its trash skeleton in black plastic bags. Its legs were made from pieces of pipe and hosing, its muzzle was a tire.

Fictocriticism

"Agribusiness writing wants to drain the wetlands. Swamps, they used to be called, dank places where bugs multiply. As if by magic the disorder of the world will be straightened out. Rarely if ever with such writing do we get the sense of chaos moving not to order but to another form of chaos."

-Michael Taussig (2010, 30)

During the industrial revolution and up to The First World War, modernist aesthetics emerged across the arts, challenging previous modes of artistic expression (Sarup 1993, 141). The features of modernism can be widely categorized as experimental, and the primary modes of such experimentation include aesthetic self-consciousness and reflexivity, attention and inquiry into "the open-ended nature of reality," and an attunement to the possibility of unconscious elements slipping into text (131). Modernists were concerned with finding "an inner truth behind the surface appearance" of textual and artistic mediums, and out of the awareness of this underside of the text, an authorial awareness of one's own falling into the text emerged. Authors and artists began creating works that would "force reflection on their own construction," and, following Rosalind Krauss, this heightened attention to the meta-textual laid the groundwork for the emergence of post-modern aesthetics and practices (1980, 40).

Instead of looking for the spectral behind the text, a concern of modernism, post-modernism turned to the machinations within the text. Literary analysis and composition in and after the post-modern moment shifted from previous modernist concerns, to inquiries into the mechanisms and forms by which the text was constructed, especially the operations of linguistic representation. Intellectuals in the post-modern moment were

interested in the text's "own revelation of convention, its own surface" (Krauss 1980, 38). The turn from modernist aesthetics to post-modern ones, including the critique of master narratives allowed by such development, opened the possibility for questioning the conventions of literary and academic genres of writing, and experimenting with the line between them.

Rosalind Krauss calls this tendency toward experimentation and transgression between genres "the paraliterary" (1980, 38) and traces its birth to the writing of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. She suggests that these thinkers not only wrote about their ideas but employed them in the craft of their writing (38). Krauss claims that they used polyvocality and literature in philosophical criticism. Such approaches included the use of text within their own text, and literary and narrative style (38). Gerrit Haas situates Krauss' comments on the work of these two thinkers within the history of the development of fictocritical writing, saying that "paraliterary" might have rather been called "paracritical or paratheoretical" (2017, 9).

Haas writes that "fictocriticism is often evoked to subsume motivated experimental writing practices... and... problematize the distinctions between fiction and criticism, between fiction and non-fiction, between philosophy and literature" (7). Fictocriticism is at once a style and a critique, or, a critique in the form of style. This critique in form and style proceeds out of the post-modern attention to what the text can do in its textuality, rather than reading text as pointing to something located somewhere else, either behind or beside it.

Fictocriticism performs, in text, a critique that has been central to academic debates since the post-colonial moment, and it calls into question the nature of the relations

between the subject of writing, and the representation of it in text. It “interrogates the violence of representation inherent in speaking for and about another” (Flavell 2009). Can I, as a western subject, create a textual object that captures the world on the page without losing the material and affective quality of the subject at hand? Fictocritical writing assumes that traditional academic writing actually doesn’t do what it espouses to do so well, making perfect copies of the world in text. Linguistic representation falls short in multiple ways, and fictocritical writing revels in the linguistic disjuncture. It plays with representation rather than masking its problems, as academic writing does, “[drawing] attention to the arbitrary nature of objective knowledge, thus reflecting on... academic writing as a way of knowing and representing the world.” (Haas 8). Following the post-colonial moment and the post-modern moment in the 1980s, it has been increasingly important to write in ways that subvert positivism as historically embedded in the Western academy. Fictocriticism addresses the problems inherent in language and in writing about others. With the specter of climate disaster looming, not even the boundary between land and water will remain in place. What then might fictocriticism be good for?

Ethnographers Michael Taussig and Kathleen Stewart practice fictocritical writing in ways that address local ramifications of the political, economic, and cultural fallout from global capitalism. In their work, they demonstrate how and why fictocriticism is indispensable. Taussig addresses the shortcomings of traditional academic writing in his 2010 essay *The Corn Wolf: Writing Appotropaic Texts*, and he employs fictocritical writing to grapple with complex problems of ecological devastation in low land Colombia in *Palma Africana* (2018). Stewart’s work is imbued with fictocritical practices that are suggestive of ways that ethnographers might relate the atmospherics and poetics of daily life on the

page, through form and style (2011). Fictocriticism was popular in Australian anthropology before it took hold in the U.S., and Michael Taussig, who trained many of its contemporary practitioners at Columbia University, and Michael Jackson, an Australian professor at Harvard, are largely responsible for its growing influence in U.S. discourses.

The term fictocriticism was coined in Toronto, by cultural critic Jeanne Randolph (Flavell 2009). Along with her work in cultural theory, Randolph is a psychiatrist, and has written in a fictocritical style about the arts in Canada since the 1970s, breaking rules of citation and literary genre (2009). Her work explores binaries in psychoanalysis and art, and “attacks” authority, judgement, and legitimacy (2009). Flavell traces the movement of the term “fictocriticism” from Canada to Australia, illustrating that Stephen Muecke, who practiced fictocritical ethnographic writing in Australia without calling it such, picked up the term when he was interviewed by one of Randolph’s students, Andrea Ward. Stephen Muecke and Noel King would go on to use the term in a 1991 article, “On Fictocriticism,” published in the Australian Book Review. As an example of Muecke’s fictocritical style, he coauthored a quasi-ethnography both with and about the lives of Krim Benterrak and Paddy Roe, two artists who practice aboriginal forms of painting and drawing. Benterrak contributed paintings of the landscape, which Muecke foregrounds in the text, and Roe traces paths through the landscape, telling stories of the dreaming. Instead of taking Roe’s stories and changing their language or writing *about* them, Muecke transcribes them as they were spoken, letting the substances of cultural life trickle into the text and leave their mark.

Following Muecke’s work, fictocriticism was popularized in the Australian academy, especially as a mode of ethnographic writing and a form adopted by feminist thinkers

(Flavell 2009). But what about its movement into U.S. academies? Taussig was born in Australia in 1940 and went on to study medicine at the University of Sydney. Later, he would study anthropology at the London School of Economics. While teaching at the University of Michigan and Columbia, he has written books and taught students that will continue to seed fictocritical writing in the U.S.

Following Geertz, ethnography is always partially fictional because it creates “second or third order” interpretations, which diverge from first order experience (1973, 15). Addressing the work of Deleuze, Todd May (2005) writes that Deleuze’s work disrupts projects of identification- of positivist notions of identifying, categorizing, and naming things in the world (20). Fleshing out Deleuzian concepts of knowledge, May writes, “When doctors seek to understand a lesion they cannot see, they palpate the body. They create a zone of touch where the sense of the lesion can emerge without its being directly experienced” (20). Fictocriticism critiques academic writing, and by extension, some forms of ethnography, for assuming to be able to apprehend the world and make perfect copies of it, or, to stay with May’s example, to be able to directly apprehend the internal lesion. At the same time, it does the palpating work. Taking seriously the challenge of retaining the qualities of first order experience, it calls on narrative, poetry, fiction, drawings, and paintings, to communicate about the subject at hand in a way that is suggestive and affective rather than positivistic. Instead of trying to nail down the identity of the subject at hand, fictocritical writing seeks to capture the essence or the spirit of what is written about.

In *Palma Africana*, Taussig writes about the swamplands and palm plantations in Northern Colombia, where paramilitaries and peasants clash on a terraformed stage

orchestrated by agribusiness backed by global capital. His writing is explicitly fictocritical, as the book is just as much about the politics of representation as it is about the swamp world of Colombia. Finding himself faced with the task of writing about a “universe animated by fear and violence” Taussig’s “words engage with what the writing is about as if the things being written about have climbed into the sentences and the thoughts those sentences convey” (2018, 30). The uncanny ability that words and sentences have not only to refer to something, but to transmute that something onto the page and into the reader’s mind, Taussig calls the “magic of mimesis” (193). The spirit of the thing, maintained in transmuted form, Taussig calls *mana* (194), and it is through stylistic choices in writing or storytelling that *mana* is born (195). For Taussig, things have affective capacities, atmospheres, that might be simulated in writing. Such simulation is not possible if one writes *about* the subject. The writer must write with it, or, rather, let it write.

If fictocriticism at once aims to transmute the spirit of the thing written about into *mana* (ficto), and to serve as a critique of positivist forms of writing and representing (criticism), what would happen if one took as their project the former portion of the project of fictocriticism only? Vivieros de Castro (2018) calls for a “multiple and combined refusal of the present cosmopolitical assemblage instituted by the moderns” as a requisite for staving off the detrimental effects of the Anthropocene (178). Traditional academic writing, “agribusiness writing” is found throughout the academy, “and everyone knows it when they don’t see it” (Taussig 2010, 29). This form of writing, Taussig says, “is a mode of production... that conceals the means of production, assuming writing as information to be set aside from writing that has poetry, humor, luck, sarcasm...the subject becoming object (29). Traditional academic writing tries to conceal the disorder of the world by ordering it in

text, aiming for “mastery, rather than mastery of non-mastery” (29). In the Anthropocene, the rule is disorder. Water bodies are polluted, air pollution leads to around seven million deaths per year (Denny 2017, 38), and the sixth extinction has already begun (18). The modern cosmopolitical order is embedded in the academy and its research conventions, and in order to reckon with changes in the Anthropocene, it is requisite to question the ability of traditional writing to communicate objective knowledge and take seriously the magical potency of writing with objects, capturing their *mana*. Palpating the world with writing and affective prose might produce knowledge that proves indispensable for dealing with the fallout from the Anthropocene, and if so, the ficto in fictocriticism might be useful.

Clearwater Season: Reading



Springer's Point

Still June? 2059. Entry 2.

My watch is dead. Boats taken apart to build shelters. I lay in mine when the sun reaches its peak in the afternoon. Plenty of fishing materials. We catch plastic bags mostly, some fish.

Hot season. 2059. Entry 3.

Birds have taken over trash island. They have nowhere else to land. It's nice to eat something besides fish but there is bird shit everywhere. A mixed blessing. Full stomach. Shit everywhere. Tonight, I'm laying outside my shelter listening. Herring gulls, Terns, Heron, Ibis, with the pink beaks, and sandpipers. They group together and peck at each other. I saw a Little Green Heron. Their calls are wild like the patterns on a shell. They rise and mix with the sound of water washing. I think of Springer's Point, the sound side beach. On Springer's there was a live oak where the forest path opened to the beach. Its branches were so gnarled and twisted they touched the ground. My father took his yearbook photos under it every year. I did too. On picture day before graduation, my class walked through the forest, the boys wearing khakis and white shirts, the girls in skirts. We walked in silence in the shade. We passed the racoon's home. It lived in a dying pine, solitary in a vacuous corner of the forest. There was a stump below the tree with its face carved on it. On the beach, small waves lapped against the shore. A white fishing boat was anchored off the point, lonely against endless blue. Wind whistled through the forest, humming, lifting the branches, stirring the birds. Tonight, I watched the sun set. I don't know how long I've been here. It helps keep time during the day. I'm writing under its fading light. The world is all blue now. I wonder if fish are swimming in the trees.

The wind picked up. It was before dawn and I was restless from pain. I hobbled outside. The shelters were lined with piles of white and pink salt. I walked to the edge of the patch and the moonlight spilled over the death float. Gusts of wind nearly blew me into the water. The jellies started to blow toward the horizon. The first stars appeared. I felt a presence behind me. Pelican placed their hand on my shoulder and aligned the astrolabe with the Northern horizon. We watched the death float retreat together. The mustangs emerged from under the horizon, as if galloping out of the ocean. Pelican ran into the shelter and blew the plastic horn. Islanders stumbled out into the moonlight and gathered along the water's edge. Silhouettes against the night, their tattered clothing flew about in the wind. Whitecaps appeared, and waves crashed on the shore for the first time in over a year.

The next day, Pelican gave the first performance of the season. They said animals could speak to them from the seafloor again. They tromped around on the tower dock in a trance, acting out animal movements, and told us how the animals were doing after such a long period without contact. Bits of bright plastic hung down from their hair. Pelican moved on all fours, snorting, neighing, calling like a bird, whistling like wind in leaves. Islanders gathered around. Some sat on upturned buckets, others stood close to the platform. They had something to look forward to in the evenings now. Because I had a vision of the mustangs and I was there when they returned, Pelican thought I was gifted with the abilities of a seer like them and grandmother. Pelican asked me to quit my job and train with them, but I had to help with the clearwater fish run. The fish surface in droves after a death float. For the next month I worked at the fish processing compound. The sun baked the trash and melted the plastics. Everyone wears cloth around their mouths and

noses. You can suffocate on the gasses. They walk up and down the well-worn paths that zigzag through hills of trash. You can find things to wear. Goggles, plastic bags, water-logged hats. Pelican came calling after the fish run. I knew it was only a matter of time. We sat atop the tower dock and watched the sun set. It sank into the water and flashed violently, throwing orange and red onto rolling hills of refuse. "Have you made a decision?" they asked. A red gasoline can caught the light. Plastic bottles coruscated like silver fish scales. A ship porthole, round glass, sent the lingering gold back out to sea. It faded and darkness fell.

While Pelican taught me to read, the water shortage got worse. Islanders set out buckets and fasted in honor of the mustangs so that rain would come. Pelican taught me the alphabet first. Then, they sat beside me on a bucket and let me hold the book. I sounded out the words while they moved their finger under them. Pelican and I continued meeting at the tower dock in the evening, and they brought me books they found and hid away. My handwriting was horrible, but I brought lists of words to ask about. I opened books and dryland appeared. All that was buried and killed was preserved in the pages. I became a historian. I kept scrapbooks of photos and ragged papers I found on the Patch. I searched for a dictionary and found one. I wrote with fish blood and sharp objects. I passed Pelican's tests, and they let me come into the back room of the shelter and spend time with the book. They rubbed my upper body with salt and made me sit on the floor between candles and seahorses. Before I began reading the sacred text for the first time, they told me about the Wave. "Like the others who survived, grandmother was on a crisis boat. Ocracokers stocked them with emergency supplies and kept them anchored in the middle of the village when storms got bad. She was working at the rations station when the Wave came. Her

father and brother were at the pump across the island. By the time the Wave rose it was too late. She tried to motor to the pump station. The dam at Silver Lake burst and the island was gone in seconds. Water demolished everything. Buried the village, the beach. In its turbulence were caught wood from houses and docks, animals, jet skis, golf carts, boats, fences, lawnmowers, and fishing gear. All accumulated in a vast swirl." I began reading every evening and Pelican sat beside me and worked on a mural of the Ocracoke lighthouse, surrounded by grass and trees. Red and purple shells decorated the border. "Grandmother wrote to keep from going insane," Pelican said. "She watched the world disappear. You'll see. The sacred text was an attempt to preserve her memories."

After a week, I could hardly believe what I had read. A whole world was swept away. "I wonder how much of the old village is still on the ocean floor?" I asked Pelican. They told me that it was all still there, and that when the horses shimmer on the water, the animals start walking on the sea floor. "It's in the book," they said. "Keep reading." Pelican said goodnight and I walked back to my shelter. The rain had stopped, and I looked out over the water. White caps blew along its surface. I thought about the ocean floor, about everything that must be there. I conjured a picture of the village, but as if water was leaking into my head, I saw it submerged again. The sacred text was haunting. So many dead people below. Thousands of years of history gone. All I will ever know is trash mountains, the taste of birds and fish, and death by malaria, I thought. I went to sleep thinking of sailboats.

I spent the next week working at the fish compound. I couldn't stand being with Pelican for too long. They talked a lot. From anywhere on the island one can see the sea all around. I felt antagonized by the sea. It was hiding everything I wanted. I couldn't stop imagining what dryland must have looked like. Trees, animals, endless paths. I wanted to

go underneath. "If the waters ever go down," Pelican told me, "it will be because of us that the animals are still there. Since the death float cleared, I've gotten continues messages from them." While I read the sacred text, Pelican walked around in front of the shelter with their eyes closed. They leaned over and petted the animals they saw. "A beautiful horse," they would say. Or, "It's okay, come sit on my shoulder. I won't hurt you." They especially loved the bird spirits. I closed the book and walked outside. "Here, pet the little horse," they said. I leaned over and closed my eyes.

"I don't feel anything," I said.

"Just let it come up to you," they said. "Breathe." All I felt was salt on my palms. The animals were below! That's what the book said. In her final entries Pelican's grandmother mentioned horses on the trash patch, but I didn't buy it. I went back in the shelter and opened the book again.

Fictions

“Taking its cue from art and literature as much as from the sciences, anthropology might understand itself less as the study of an objectified humanity than as the open-ended, performative exploration of alternative possibilities of collective existence—of new ways of being human and other than human.”

-Stuart McLean (2017, x)

In his book *Fictionalizing Anthropology* Stuart McLean makes an argument for the political power of writing that addresses the problematic situatedness of ethnographers as figures who inhabit a murky epistemological space between two worlds. Anthropologists inhabit a space of “betweenness,” along “culturally demarcated zones of transition, ambiguity, and classificatory uncertainty” (McLean 2017, 102). Anthropology is an academic discourse that has been traditionally rooted in Enlightenment ideas, especially a trust in empiricism and the impossibility of magic and animism. Anthropology as a post-Enlightenment science might be “committed to resist” animism, but the life worlds that anthropologists study sometimes operate out of ontological trajectories in which animism is at work (Stengers 2018, 99). McLean suggests that anthropology has historically tried to “appropriate and master this ‘being of the middle’ as a packaged and labeled object of academic scrutiny” (110). Anthropologists ask how we deal with this being-in-the-middle problem. How can I translate or problematize what I witnessed in *this* far-away place into rational and scientific terms? McLean argues that instead of seeing the in-between as problematic, it should be seen rather as an “elusive and wayward... but nonetheless constitutive” discursive space (110).

McLean (2017) claims that the middle ground is part of a larger thesis/political claim. Namely, that anthropologists have an obligation not only to “describing and

documenting” the present, but also “to intervening in changing it” (152). Latour famously writes that Western academic culture often conceptualizes the beliefs of non-Western peoples as only beliefs, because they do not stand up to the test of science and reason (Latour 1993, 99). This construct results in the view that the non-West functions under illusions about what is and is not real. Measuring the world against the benchmark of positivistic science is a marker of “the one-world world,” where only one reality fits (De la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 3). Hegemony over what does and does not constitute knowledge opens possibilities for researchers to give their opinion about what is really going on in the non-West, from a trusted scientific position, and renders the non-West as *terra nullis* (3). Latour reminds us that science is a cultural construct, just like magic (1993, 99). The same ideological currents that underpin discursive erasure of indigenous ways of knowing are also at work in extractivist practices in the Anthropocene (De la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 3). “Extractivism... creates space for the tangible expansion of the one world by rendering empty the places it occupies and making absent the worlds that make those places” (3). McLean (2017) suggests that instead of using anthropology as the handmaiden of hegemonic practice, anthropology and its writing practices ought to “be capable of challenging and extending the parameters of what is understood to comprise reality” (152). As a method, he offers the concept “fabulatory comparativism” (156).

Ethnography isn’t a passive endeavor in which the life world under study can simply be copied into the pages. McLean’s method for explaining this lies in the transformative power of comparison. “Ethnographic knowledge is produced through the transformative juxtaposition of bodies, languages, sensibilities, and life worlds, just as ethnographic writing [and] filmmaking... are a product and a record of such juxtapositions (157).

Ethnographic writing, then, always makes new worlds. Neither the ethnographer's home nor the field site is left unchanged in text; ethnography is both a representation of the poesis that occurs when two worlds brush into contact, and the material document of the poesis itself; a novel world constituted from previous ones. For McLean, the transitory zone between worlds is what is under study in ethnography, and it is in this zone that worlds can be "poetically affirmed" (157), rather than disfigured into positive categories. His method takes seriously the inchoate nature of life worlds, "[affirming] that reality is not exhaustively expressed in the actual but includes in itself the possibility of being otherwise" (157). Writing in and about the in-between is, for McLean, a form of fabulation, "the invention in the present of what is yet to come" (157). If neither the world of the researcher or the researched is left intact in the ethnographic text, then the poesis of "the in-between" is itself a novel world; a fiction in terms of its relationship to the untransmutable reality of prior worlds. For McLean, the "other-than-human" is indispensable to the creation of the in-between. Materialities are both the source and limit of cultural worlds (158). Therefore, the disruption of nature that has and will come with the Anthropocene is a disruption of the very building blocks of cultural worlds. Thus, the Anthropocene will require improvisation and augmentation in lifeways, and also, new research methods that anticipate these changes.

Magical creatures called *huldufólk* (elves, gnomes, and dwarves), inhabit the countryside in Iceland, so claim many Icelanders. A map of Reykjavík, created in 1988 by the town planning department, indicates the hiding places of each of these creatures (McLean 2017, 6). Foreign journalists, tourists, and folklorists arrive at the beginning of summer each year to investigate the magical happenings, and so did anthropologist Kirsten

Hastrup. On fieldwork from Oxford, where Hastrup had been studying the “extensive literature” of Icelandic folklore (7), she found herself lost in a fog behind the farming community in which she was working. According to McLean, Hastrup claims and continues to assert that she met a *huldufólk* in the fog. Did she actually see this creature? Mclean asks. Is that the wrong question? And if so, what does this say about anthropology’s failings to take seriously the worlds it studies (7)? Paving a novel set of understandings of enmeshed cultural worlds, including their materialities, McLean points to the mythopoetic history of Iceland to consider Hastrup’s claim.

For McLean, the materiality of the landscape prefigures the meanings which are attached to it (20). The land is not a blank slate onto which meaning is projected, but the source of meaning. In the ninth century the first settlers began arriving in Iceland. These Scandinavians arrived in a land never before inhabited by humans. Here, the pre-Christian Norse cosmology, influenced by Celtic and Scandinavian traditions, took hold, and its ruins persisted in modern Iceland after Christianity was adopted in 1000 CE (7). The primary marker of the perseverance of pre-Christian mythology is the dialectic between two material zones, the zone within the fence, and the zone outside the fence, or, the distinction between the social and the wild (8). “The latter was the abode of outlaws, banished and stripped... of the protection of the law, as well as a variety of other-than-human presences, many of them thought of as preexisting the arrival of the first human settlers” (8). McLean shows that the other-than-human creatures of the wild can be traced to early Eddic poetry, featuring Odin, a giant, Ymir, and “a race of anthropomorphic gods” (9). In the Norse mythopoetic tradition, the corporal material of this giant, Ymir, was said to have created the world.

McLean's thesis is that the material world isn't a tabula rasa onto which we project meaning, but the wellspring of meaning itself. Giants are "the condensations out of the primordial matter from which everything in the universe is fashioned, including humans... and the stories they tell" (9). McLean suggests that the very immutability of Iceland's environment bore a cosmology, not the other way around. The manifestation of the other-than-human as prior to the cultural and atmospheric world in which Icelanders now live "[forces] us to ask whether the cultural-historical mediation of nature that remains an article of faith for much anthropological (and other) scholarship is not itself mediated by the suprahuman" (17). McLean reads Hastrup's assuredness that she really saw *something* as an act of other-than-human agency. She is "[interpolated] by an other-than-human materiality that subtends the making and unmaking of human worlds" (20). The Icelandic creatures are not confined to local histories only, but index the vibrancy of other-than-human matter, "a reality that is at once the constituent stuff of our cultural imaginings (as indeed of our bodies, thoughts, affects, sensations)... that forever exceeds our cognitive or representational grasp" (20). In the Anthropocene, non-human actors take on agency in explicit and undeniable form. Therefore, McLean's analysis of the preeminence of materiality will be indispensable to Anthropocene writing.

McLean's critique of ethnographic writing is one that aligns with the project of fictocriticism, but also, begs questions about the intellectual value of literary fiction. McLean's suggestion that anthropology should aim create worlds, change the world, and feel at the boundaries of reality, and such strategies are necessary in the Anthropocene, when cultural and ecological worlds are threatened by the instability of previously stable materialities. McLean lists economic inequality, ethnic, religious, and free-market

fundamentalism, genocides, wars, refugee crises, walls, immigration bans, and mass deportation, arguing that our world is as unstable as the one in the Eddic creation myth (ix). For him, the end of our world is the beginning of a new one. With the precarity of humanity due to Anthropocene processes, what is speculation about our connection with other non-human beings or the status of the earth void of humans? (ix). McLean suggests that such speculation will be indispensable for human survival, especially as we have to augment the way we live (ix).

Donna Haraway suggests another form of speculation, which is important because it opens possibilities for rethinking what it means to live with other-than-human species. The earth is filled with human and non-human refugees. Forests are clear cut, lakes polluted, mountain tops removed; both human and non-human habitats of safety or “refuges” have become fragile and scarce in the Anthropocene. She suggests that we have the power to recreate refuge spaces. She writes that humans and non-human “critters” must “join forces” to remake refuges; “to make possible partial and robust biological-cultural-political... recuperation and recomposition” (Haraway 2015, 160). The “Chthulucene” is Haraway’s alternative name for the Anthropocene, based not on Lovecraft’s problematic Cthulu character, but rather on “the diverse earth-wide tentacular powers and forces... like Naga, Gaia... Pachamama... and many many more” (160). The entangled temporalities and kin making that these tentacular powers facilitate are for Haraway a point of illumination for thinking about ways to build refuges in the Anthropocene. “I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge,” writes Haraway (160).

As a strategy for joining with the other-than-human, and as mitigation for the overpopulation problem, Haraway suggests that humans “make kin” in ways that are counter to the traditional genealogical template for the family (161). “Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or human” (161). Kin in the Anthropocene can be relatives without ties by birth, lateral relatives, non-human animals (161). Haraway sees the world we live in as one prefigured by modern notions of progress and the family. This order “is not necessary...another world is not only urgently needed, it is possible, but not if we are ensorcelled in despair, cynicism, or optimism, and the belief/disbelief discourse of Progress” (Haraway 2016, 51). She reminds us that all organisms are kin “in the deepest sense,” they “share a common ‘flesh’ laterally, semiotically, and genealogically” (103). These kin networks, or families, make possible “assemblages” that have the capacity to undo the devastating Anthropocene forces, and create refuges (162- 201).

The other-than-Anthropocene world Haraway imagines, where the forces that created the Anthropocene die away and new practices of being-together and worlding replace it, is the best possible outcome, and one that is highly unlikely according to climate scientists Steffen et al, who project a sixth mass extinction (2011, 843), and Mark Denny (2017, 18), who argues that it has already begun. Scientific projections are useful because they communicate the urgency of climate disaster, but at the same time, scientists neglect to consider the possibility of radical change. Haraway and McLean write about the indispensability of building alternative worlds, and they provide suggestions about how to do so. But their arguments fail to offer a detailed simulation of what an alternative world might look like, once established. In the realm of science fiction, the suggestions and inchoate simulations of worlds like the ones Haraway and McLean imagine are realized in

text. Such writing pulls us into “new localities and means of presence,” and creates alternative worlds in which the political, “racial,” ecological, and economic present is reworked (Anderson et al, 2018).

Clearwater Season: Diving



Island Pony

(Ehringhaus 1988, 12)

Hot season. 2059. Entry 5.

Hotter. Dead fish floating on the surface. I think of the summer my dad dug a pond and stocked it with fish. The oxygen wasn't right or something. I stood in tall grass and found them floating gills up in the brown water.

Hot season. 2059. Entry 6.

In case anyone will ever want to know. Sir Walter Raleigh's expedition landed on Ocracoke in the late 1500s. They built a fort farther North, but the Inlet at Ocracoke remained an important passageway to the mainland. The island was called Wokokon. A native word. The N.C. colonial assembly passed a navigation act and pilots were stationed on the island. That was the 1700s. They hauled cargo from large sailing vessels into smaller ones, which ran across the Pamlico to mainland. Blackbeard preyed on the merchants. So did the sea. The shallow topography of the sea floor off the inlet was dangerous for ships, and the coast was named the graveyard of the Atlantic. My ancestors were surfmen when the USS Home wrecked off the coast on Christmas Eve. Most of the crew drowned when the boat broke apart in the waves. My grandfather saved the captain, who gave him his captain's chair. In the revolution, the Americans smuggled supplies to George Washington through Ocracoke Inlet before Valley Forge. The lighthouse was built in 1823. Before the flood, there was a gravesite in memory of British soldiers who washed up on the beach during the Second World War, when German submarines prowled along the coast. This history has disappeared beneath me. It is as if 4.4 billion years were erased and human history started over. "In the beginning was the trash patch. Out of the ocean, the trash patch was the first land." I am the first organism, crawling.

Hot season. 2059. Entry 7.

Before the flood there were three large neighborhoods and lots of rental houses. There were two ferry docks. One on the north end from Swan Quarter, one on the south end from Hatteras. In the summer the ferry came four times a day. In the winter it came three. They blew its horn when arriving and departing. On porches and in store fronts, locals looked out toward the dock when it blew. There was a grocery store, a teacher's college, a bar, a museum, a surf shop, horse pastures, horses, lots of birds, green, trees, thirteen miles of beach, a high school, a book shop, a folk festival in the summer, an art gallery.

It was my day off from work and I peddled my bike toward town. The graveyard shimmered in the afternoon heat. An orange kitten jumped in the bushes. I passed rows of houses. Bright reds and yellows, muted colors, on stilts to protect against flooding. Crisis boats trailered in yards. The rental houses had names like Hammock Beach, Hang Ten, Oar House, Sandpiper Nest, Cottage in the Oaks. A friend passed on a bike, shirtless, and a surfboard under his arm. I passed Ocracoke Bar, the grocery, and the Pony Island restaurant. Down Highway 12 there was nothing but marshes and the beach. I passed where red-winged black birds could always be found. The Pamlico sound flashed blue between the trees.

I passed the yoga studio, its sign crooked and weather-beaten. A purple LGBTQ flag flew in the yard over a huge agave plant. After biking for a while, I turned down a gravel road that snaked through the marsh beds and reeds. The heat of the day lingered. Cicadas whirred steadily making white noise, cresting and receding like waves on the beach. Peddling became more difficult and the gravel crunched under the weight of my bike. I decided to get off and push.

I saw crabbers collecting their pots in the shallows on the back side of the island. I could make out a white yurt ahead. A dock in a shallow creek. I walked past the yurt to a wooden house. Its entrance was overgrown with reeds. There were boards missing from the path that connected it to the gravel road. Greenery poked through. A tall metal gate blocked entry to the path. Wind chimes hung from its metal bars. There was no mailbox, no lights on. I turned and tried to see down to the end of the road. There was a barn, and I recognized a dappled grey in the pasture. I walked into the barn. The smell of haybales was sweet and it descended from a loft where they were stacked. Four stalls lined each side of the barn, all of them open. I walked to the end of the barn. A grey was in the pasture, and it limped to the gate. I turned and gathered a handful of hay from the nearest stall floor. I held it out, and it ate from my hands.

Early in the morning I decided to see how long I could hold my breath. I put my goggles on and jumped off the tower dock feet first. The original lighthouse is directly below the surface there, and I could see it below. I swam downward, feeling my hands drag through the water. Below the lighthouse were the remains of the keeper's quarters. Driftwood scattered the seafloor. The skeleton of a maritime forest. A few cars were visible in the distance, buried in sand. I pulled myself onto the metal railing outside the lighthouse and swam inside through a broken window. A school of red fish swam out from the spiral stairway then disappeared below. The wooden deck on which the light had sat was speckled with holes. I looked down the spiral stairway. The inside of the lighthouse was brick, and it widened out toward the bottom. I was out of breath. I swam back to the broken windows and looked out. Nothing but blue. I was out of breath, and I looked up at the

bottom of the trash patch. I pulled myself through the window and kicked off toward the surface. I was beginning to lose consciousness. Shadows played on the surface above. Hooves in the distance. A herd of mustangs galloped through the water.

I trained to be able to hold my breath for longer. It was only a matter of time before the death float would return, and I wanted to see the animals before the mustangs retreated again. Every morning, I dove from the tower dock and climbed into the lighthouse. I pulled myself down its spiral stairs until I gave out of breath. Then, I pulled myself back up the stairs, out onto the platform, and kicked to the surface. I looked down. Lightheaded, I saw herds of horses, bird flocks, snakes, and deer on the seafloor. I made it further down the lighthouse every week and the visions became more vivid. After some time, I was able to reach bottom. I wanted to pull myself back to the surface along its outer walls to save time, but there was nothing to hold on to. I took a rope and tied it to the railing on my next dive. I swam to the seafloor and tied it off to a large rock. I could stay down longer and resurface in just seconds.

Twice in the clear season, the navigator puts on her quarantine suit and takes the only remaining crisis boat to Central Patch, over where Raleigh used to be, for updates on world news. We have no signal and no hope for communication with others here. They have a radio on Central Patch. During my dive training, she returned from her first trip of the season. Her belly was swollen and protruding past her toes. She was pregnant. The News: In North Patch, the largest trash island in North America, mob violence has led to a civil war. A mutated Malaria parasite devastated the floating city. Fish populations increased in the year's death floats, and last year, the average life span was fifty. I found it

difficult to care about the status of the aquaworld. My dreams and my waking thoughts were filled with images of dryland and animals.

Science Fiction and Possible Futures

"Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places."

-Donna Haraway (2016, 1).

The literary genre science fiction has a complicated history, and as Rieder reminds us, its first iterations experimented with encounters between European travelers and colonized subjects. It is a genre prefigured by colonial relationships (2012, 2). Today, Afro-futurism, and the science fiction of writers like Ursula Le Guin and Octavia Butler is not only radically different from early colonial era novels in the genre but are also explicit critiques of hegemony, violence, and colonialism (Le Guin 2014, Okorafor 2015). Haraway writes that Le Guin's work is full of "situated, mortal, germinal wisdom" (2016, 118). "As a genre that lends itself toward subversive critique, science fiction at its most socially incisive has often been crafted by women and people of color and has been central to the development of feminist, Afro, and Indigenous futurisms. These critical literatures engage the ways in which dominant imaginaries project gendered, racialized, and colonial tropes into and onto the future, while also highlighting alternative visions," writes Lempert (2018). Like anthropology, science fiction as a genre has gone beyond acknowledging its colonial past and provided valuable alternatives for creating and imagining a world where there are alternatives to subjection (Collins 2018).

Le Guin exhibited an "astounding ability to think outside the Western cultural patriarchal box" in her twenty-two novels and eleven short story collections (Barr 2018). Her *City of Illusions* (1966), "[anticipated] many of the ideas about power relationships and the effects of imperialism on the colonized..." and "later became central to post-colonial

criticism” (Caesar 2010, 47). In Cummins’ *Understanding Ursula K Le Guin*, Le Guin is quoted saying, “If science fiction has a major gift to offer literatures I think it is just this: the capacity to face an open universe. Physically open, psychically open. No doors shut.” (1993, 66). In her Hainish series, of which there are six novels, Le Guin remarked that her imperative for writing was to simulate thought experiments rather than write through extrapolation (68). She wanted to examine what it would take to find “integration and integrity” in the worlds she created. She saw thought experiments as spaces where “thought and intuition can move freely within bounds set only by the terms of the experiment, which may be very large indeed” (67). She mentioned that her impulse for writing *The Word for World is Forest* came out of her anger and frustration at the Vietnam war. This novel was a simulation of a scenario in which the characters fail to find the “language, ethics, and technology” to lessen alienation (103). *The Dispossessed* was the opposite. It was an exploration utopia. This novel tells the story of Shevek, a space traveler who explores freedom, anarchism, structure, capitalism, technological innovation, and cultural estrangement. “What good is any anthropology that doesn’t imagine better lives and futures, and then work to make them real?” writes Oman-Reagan (2018). Le Guin’s writing can be read as an array of simulations of such better futures. As Jenks argues regarding Octavia Butler’s work, it could be used in the classroom to “encourage students to engage” in world building (2017).

Mathew Wolf-Meyer, an anthropologist who started his academic career in literature, writes, “It surprised me when I moved into anthropology and was surrounded by people who took [science fiction] seriously” (2018). Since the 1950s, anthropologists have looked to science fiction as a didactic genre that offers a forward-looking orientation

(Collins 2003, 182). While issues of the Anthropocene bring a novel immediacy to the speculative work that happens in science fiction, there is a shared history between science fiction and anthropology, with a literature to show it. Anthropologist Chad Oliver began using science fiction, including his own, in the classroom in the late 1950s. Leon Stover taught “social science fiction” courses in the mid 1960s at the Illinois Institute of Technology, and in 1970 Arthur Harkins and Margoroh Maruyama organized the first panel on “cultural futuristics” at the American Anthropological Association meeting (186). In 1968 Stover co-edited an anthology of “Golden Age science fiction” called *Apeman, Spaceman*, which offered new categorizations for anthropology’s subfields, and in the 1980s, anthropology and science fiction courses were popularized in Canada and the United States, catalyzed by the burgeoning post-modern moment (186). In 1982, the journal *Cultural Futures* began its short-lived publication, merging two periodicals, *ANTHRO-TECH: A Journal of Speculative Anthropology* and *Cultural and Education Futures*, (it lasted two years). Its editor, Reed Riner, hoped that this journal would foster collaboration between social scientists, science fiction writers, and other futurists (187). The anthropologists that turned to consider future worlds, writing before the post-modern moment, were influenced by functionalism, which was problematic for the projects imagined (188). Specifically, while contemporary voices in anthropology are concerned about undoing the violence of systematization, repression, and fascism, Collins writes that the early anthropological futurists were more concerned with creating stability and homeostasis in the shadow of technological innovation and the Vietnam War than about addressing global ecological and political-economic disaster (188).

Anderson et al., in response to Haraway's call for entanglement and science fiction/speculative feminism, write that speculation opens us "toward futurity and the possibilities and problems presented by otherness and afterness" (2018). Difference lies at the nexus of anthropology and science fiction, and like McLean's concept of the in-between, difference isn't about comparison only, but what becomes possible *after* comparison. What can be included and excluded from the worlds we compare, even if such worlds are fictional and speculative? Speculative writing, including science fiction, pushes us to "challenge the taken-for-granted by pushing boundaries of the individual and society, the human and alien, the planet, and life itself" (Anderson et al, 2018). For Jenks, it "offers an essential opportunity to encourage students to engage with the present by envisioning a more just future" (2017). For Oman-Reagan, speculative fiction can be a form of ethnography. He sees "speculative ethnography" as "any creative engagement with possible futures crafted using imaginative anthropological approaches toward the aim of building just and ethical relations across spatial and temporal scales" (2018). Such writing, he argues, has the power to communicate immediate anthropological problems "better than journal articles," because it is built from the same stuff as scientific ethnographic work, while also bringing seemingly distant possibilities into the time and space of ongoing history (2018). Science fiction and speculation is indispensable to anthropology in the Anthropocene, but others argue that science fiction is a product of the capitalist system that created Anthropocene problems in the first place.

Peter Pels argues that science fiction is not a window into futurity but an articulation of capitalist fantasies. The author suggests that an investigation into why, how, and for whom science becomes fictionalized leads to a bigger question. How does science

fiction become “culturalized as a commodified spectacle- as a packaged imaginary and narrative that sells wonder, excitement, awe, horror or a temporary escape?” (2017, 10). He finds such commodification in film, but especially, in “print capitalism” (11). On the cover of his co-edited volume *Magic and Modernity* is a UFO flying by the Eiffel tower, an icon of science fiction and of modern life. Pels points to this photo as an example of what he calls the “conundrum of making cultural sense of technology in a modern world” (11). This conundrum is at the heart of his analysis of science fiction as fantasy. After science fiction “conquered mainstream Western culture in the 1980s,” it became sedimented as a form of magic within capitalist systems (10). For Pels, science fiction is a space of magical action, “where ‘magic’ points to the miraculous satisfaction of desire” (11). Further, he sees science fiction and the imagery it produces as “cultural spectacle” that provides a site of analysis into the imaginative forms and fetishism of capitalism (10).

Pels neglects to consider how the “magic” and “witchcraft” in science fiction imagery might be more than a product of alienation under capitalism, but a veiled and implicit critique of our present economic and cultural predicament. The decline of the gold standard in the 1970s rendered paper currency as floating signifiers, and this prefigured other forms of simulacra in capitalist life (Leitch 1996, 145). Instead of viewing science fiction as another post-modern simulacra, the popularity and ubiquitous consumption of science fiction imagery in the United States might be read as a culture-wide desire for a world in which the splendor of everyday life is not blunted by the effects of alienated labor and the erasure of nature. Read in the context of the deep alienation and repression that comes with capitalism, the images that Pels (2017) sees as magic, emergent out of desire and its “miraculous satisfaction” (11), might rather be an attempt to counter the sorcery of

capitalism by imagining alternative futures where circumstances might not be so bleak. Therefore, I see science fiction imagery as a revolt from within. It is a commodity but also it exhibits the deep political-economic and cultural bankruptcy that creates the commodity dreamscape as second nature in the first place by illuminating a need for a different world.

Commodity fetishism hides the social and political relations of production through exclusion and omission (Duncombe 2012, 359). The means by which entertainment corporations draw consumers in is premised on advertising that can never deliver what it promises (360), namely, a “socio-fantasy of an identity and community that the consumer desires” (360). Starbucks does this by offering a mermaid in place of “dark-skinned workers” and a “pristine white cup” in place of dirt and beans (360). Starbucks creates “a fantasy lifeworld of arts and culture...wherein the...consumer is magically transformed into a leisured artist or intellectual enmeshed within a community of... inspirational bohemians” (360). If exploited workers and dirty beans are what is obscured in Starbucks coffee, what is obscured in science fiction? Science fiction as a commodity does not sell a new identity like Starbucks, but a whole new way of living. It is not workers in the global South, sweatshops, or alienated labor that make the product possible, but the whole capitalist system in which those things are embedded. The imaginative power of science fiction is based upon the creation of a world in which there is no need for anything more than what is at hand, or for political change. In other words, its imaginative power is emergent out of a juxtaposition with a world of alienated labor. Science fiction imagery, especially in movie posters, works to trap consumers and sell a simulation of a better life. At the same time, the very businesses that sell this imagery are a portion of the world that needs to be escaped. Such imagery implies through aesthetics that the present political-

economic order must change; that there can be an alternative future. This imagery is itself political because it suggests novel possibilities for being in the world, which are only necessary because of the violent present, of which the imagery is also an expression.

While Pels (2017) writes about the juxtaposition of “the enchanted reason of...magic and science fiction” (10), as an artifact of psycho-cultural processes in commodity form, he neglects to read the critique of “the one-world world” implicit in science fiction, and to acknowledge its ability to simulate possible futures (Law 2015, 3). “The one-world world” is a world “that has granted itself the right to assimilate all other worlds and, by presenting itself as exclusive, cancels possibilities for what lies beyond its limits” (De la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 3). In the Anthropocene we need a different world more than ever. How are we to create a different future without a template for imagining it? While the literature of writers such as Ursula Le Guin is taken seriously by anthropologists, other forms of science fiction might be taken seriously too, even if they are embedded in the very consumption culture against which we revolt. Steffen et al., Haraway, and McLean all argue that radical change is necessary if we want to continue living on Earth. “To develop a universally accepted strategy to ensure the sustainability of Earth’s life support system against human-induced stresses is one of the greatest research and policy challenges ever to confront humanity,” writes Steffen et al. (2007, 619). To develop such a universal strategy, the public must organize together for global change. What better way to campaign for cultural change than in forms of mass media? In the Anthropocene, literary fiction and cinema have the capacity to offer novel ways of being. Fiction and cinema might be seen as political mediums because they posit livable futures that are alternative to the institutional worlds that market them. Science fiction is also effective because it offers methodological

alternatives to solving the climate problem, outside the scope of positivist science. Science fiction *solves the problem* immediately. It is the application that is the hard part- instating a new global culture that is anti-capitalist. If only someone might create an alternative world that is convincing enough. One that we all might choose.

Clearwater Season: Visiting Ocracoke



Surf Rods

(Ehringhaus 1988,19)

Hot season. 2059. Entry 8.

It took 4 hours and 30 minutes to go from Greenville to Ocracoke.

It took 5 hours and 30 minutes to go from Raleigh to Ocracoke.

It took 1 hour and 44 minutes to go from Hatteras to Ocracoke.

Hot season. 2059. Entry 9.

I used to be a scuba diver.

I used to be a scuba diver.

A scuba diver.

Hot season. 2059. Entry 15.

Home to over 400 bird species.

Including snowy owl.

They always said no venomous snakes. I have seen them.

Surf fishermen, kite-flyers, kiteboarders, sunbathers, shell-seekers, surfers, boogie-boarders, sandcastle-builders, nature lovers.

Dr. Beach rated lifeguard beach # 2. In the country.

Hot season. 2059. Entry 16.

We began constructing a fish cleaning facility with driftwood and metal. The tower dock is finished. People's shelters are more like homes. The atmosphere is one of tiredness. No one is going to come to our rescue. After the war, they shot anyone who didn't wear red. Ocracoke was out of the way and we didn't have to worry much. The rich are in floating houses. There is

nothing to do here but fish, walk around, and talk. Water is scarce in the hot season, and there has been no rain. Solar panels from the boats run a desalination machine. Jelly fish are dying, making a layer of blue goop. Two women are pregnant. Going fishing at the tower dock tonight.

Hot season. 2059. Entry 17.

A man contracted malaria. Needs chloroquine. I am the only doctor.

Hot season. 2059. Entry 18.

Nine more cases of malaria. Mosquitos everywhere. When I walk, they emerge in droves from under trash. I found some mechanics gloves and I've tucked my shirt into them. I made some socks with clear plastic. I don't want to die now.

End of Hot season? 2059. Entry 20.

The first rain. Everyone scrounging for buckets when they heard thunder. Desalinated water is rationed. Rainwater is free. One malaria victim still alive.

Rainy Season. 2059. Entry 24.

Shelters on east side destroyed by waves. I'm sharing mine with three people. Rain every afternoon. When the storm swell comes everyone huddles on the west side. We'll rebuild the shelters here.

Rainy Season. 2059. Entry 25.

Woke up and walked to the edge of the patch. Everything is black. Only constellations in the sky. Giant horses. Mustangs.

I trained until I could hold my breath underwater for sixteen minutes. I dove at least once a day. With fins made from car tires I increased my travel time to and from the bottom. I kept rocks at the base of the lighthouse and placed them on my fins when I descended. That way, I could just stand and look out. The longer I dove, the more I saw of Ocracoke. Trees appeared, and then whole forests. A path opened in front of me, I stepped onto it, and the rocks slipped from my fins. I floated to the surface before my vision started. Down again. Deer ran in the forest, jumping over downed limbs. Springer's point appeared, and horses waded knee deep in the waves. I heard birdsong. The town appeared. It was hazy in the beginning, and when fish swam by it disappeared. I saw teenagers in their bathing suits. They walked right past me smiling at each other. When I went diving toward evening, I saw the streetlights turn on in the village. I looked out over silver lake and watched the sailboats bob on the current. Wind buffeted their sails. Cars drove by. One night, I found myself on the balcony of a motel. Music drifted up from a bar below. When I found myself in a forest I reached down and took handfuls of dirt. I rubbed it on my body. I petted the horses. I found myself on the lifeguard stand eating watermelon. I went swimming from the beach. I rode my bike down toward the end of the island, where the village disappears. Past the yoga studio with the purple flag, the yurt, the barn.

I had to take a break because I almost died. I forgot I was standing on the seafloor and gave out of breath before I could climb the rope. My vision evaporated and I found

myself floating in place. I waved my arms frantically. The rope and the light were far away. I kicked upward. Somehow, I made it to the surface. I passed out as soon as I felt the trash underneath me. For a month, I didn't touch the water. Every night I dreamed of the drowned world. On the trash patch there was nothing. It was nothing. It was Hell compared to what we lost. If I died on the seafloor it was okay with me. I wanted to be in the village with the horses. With dirt in my hands and feeling the evening air rush cool on my face. After I recovered from my near-drowning episode, I dove again. Pelican warned me that it wasn't healthy to stay down too long. "Like you, I spent years diving as a young one. Grandmother did the same when she was here. When the animals started visiting me, I thought I had gone insane. They move into the brain and take the oxygen. If you let them come in too fast, this world will disappear. Being an intermediary is dangerous, and if you leave this world and fall completely into that one, you can't mediate for the people anymore. You will become a spirit yourself and we will lose our history." That evening I watched Pelican pet the horses again. I rubbed salt on myself, walked out of the shelter, and closed my eyes. I reached out and felt them. One was tall, another one only up to my waist. They licked the salt from my hands.

Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontologies

“As soon as we take practices of mediation as well as practices of purification into account, we discover that the moderns do not separate humans from nonhumans any more than the 'others' totally superimpose signs and things.”

-Bruno Latour (1993, 104)

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, et. al, write that the Anthropocene takes on a sort of subjectivity, historically called Gaia, in which “our proud intellectual assuredness” that there is a clear distinction between those with agency, “humankind,” and “the world,” must be called into question (2018, 172-173). “The world” is now a powerful and threatening actor, “that evokes the uncaring, unpredictable, and unfathomable deities of our archaic past” (172). In that case, writing about the Anthropocene requires special concern for the agency of the world written about. Following Bruno Latour’s suggestion, the “nefarious cosmological and spatiotemporal conjunction” (172), between “humankind and the world” brought with the Anthropocene isn’t only about saving the planet, but about saving ourselves (178). A “Gaia War” has already begun, argues Latour in his *Facing Gaia*, and in order to make peace we must first acknowledge that this war is happening (2017). Then, we might make a “common world” in which the earth no longer has to struggle against ordering, distribution, and appropriation (de Castro et. al 2018, 177). A future that is universally positive for both earth and humankind requires that “we start by a multiple and combined refusal of the present cosmopolitical assemblage instituted by the moderns” (178). This includes questioning the assumption that earth is but an object to be exploited. How might forms of writing and representation contribute to this refusal?

The cosmopolitical assemblage (objects here, subjects there), which Viveiros de Castro et al call into question is especially related to issues of ecology and the earth, but their critique of modern conceptions of subject-object relations more broadly is ever-present in post-modern ethnographic writing, as noted in the first section. The prior theoretical work that made such inquiries possible was borne out of post-colonial discourses that questioned ethnographic authority, or “the reversal of the European gaze” (Clifford 1988, 22), along with the phenomenological current in continental philosophy, which posited that being is always being *in the world*, and that such being cannot be understood solely through the “self-enclosed features of human subjectivity” (Casey 1991, xix). Other theoretical currents in ethnographic writing, affect theory and object-oriented-ontology, challenge the subject-object dichotomy.

The work of phenomenological philosophers laid the foundations for a valuable critique of positivist anthropological inquiry, which assumed that we could come to know the world as it is through theory (Jackson 1996, 35). Regarding ethnographic inquiry, Jackson writes that “philosophies and theories... should be regarded as part and parcel of the world in which we live rather than transcendent views that somehow escape the impress of social interests” (2). Jackson is concerned that the researcher’s tendency to order the world through theory is a “magical defense against the unsystematic [and] disorienting reality he or she encounters” (Jackson 1989, 3-4). As an alternative to certain theoretical frameworks, phenomenological thought opens possibilities for attending to everyday experience. Such possibilities, for Jackson, must shed normative concepts of personhood, and address the range of lived experience, as mediated through the senses (27). Ethnographic method influenced by phenomenology attends to habitual, typical, and

customary experience, and also, idiosyncratic and singular experience, “our sense of things substantive and bounded... and the transitive and unbounded” (27). Object agency is a “universal and commonplace experience,” and therefore, phenomenological anthropologists take such conceptions seriously. These include intersubjective relationships between people and the earth, and people and objects (28). Certainly, phenomenological theory and the writing it engenders is indispensable to challenging the subject-object cosmopolitical order Viveiros de Castro et al write about, the one-world world.

The work of Tim Ingold is an example of ethnographic writing that is committed to documenting life as it is experienced. Ingold is an anthropologist who works in the circumpolar regions, and he has written about ways in which cultural worlds interact with and experience their environment, and about how reality is constructed through language. Ingold sketches the differences between a Cree understanding of a prey animal’s behavior and the scientific explanations for that behavior. “When pursuing a reindeer,” he writes, “there often comes a critical point when a particular animal becomes immediately aware of your presence. It then does a strange thing. Instead of running away it stands stock still, turns its head, and stares you squarely in the face” (Ingold 2011, 13). Biologists claim that such behavior in reindeer is an adaptation to predatory animals such as wolves. But this behavior makes reindeer especially vulnerable when facing humans with guns or bows. The hunter can much more easily hit its target when it is turned to the side. For the Cree people of northeastern Canada, when the reindeer turns, it is offering “a spirit of good-will or love” to the hunter (13). The animal, therefore, is not taken, but is received. Such experience with reindeer would appear preposterous to scientists, who deny the natural

world any agency, other than that which is preprogrammed in the process of evolution. But the anthropologist's job is not to determine the reasons for caribou behavior, writes Ingold (14). What matters for the anthropologist is the Cree experience of the world. When western science or social research interrupt the Cree, to analyze "objectively" what really goes on, even anthropologists must suspend disbelief, staying true to their creed of relativism. Even if the anthropologist would like to believe what the Cree say is true, the hegemony of a culture based in science, which claims absolute truth, haunts the analysis.

Ingold goes on to argue, evoking Latour, that science itself is a cultural point of view, and one that is problematic because systematizing the world renders it lifeless. "At the most fundamental level of all, we need to think again about the relation between form and process," writes Ingold. "As biologists gaze into the mirror of nature, what they see- reflected back in the morphology and behavior of organisms- is their own reason" (2011, 19). In scientific positivism, the objects under study are rendered as *just* objects. Labels, whether names or classifications, stick to them and they become currencies for human end. On the contrary, Ingold suggests that there is no separation between the human and the environment. Environments are forged by beings who dwell in them, and therefore they are always under construction. And organisms too are continuously constructed by the environment in which they dwell (20). He envisions organic life as a "creative unfolding of an entire field of relations within which beings emerge and take on particular forms... each in relation to the others" (19). This continuous and inchoate unfolding of forms is life itself, and as a method for attuning oneself to this unfolding, he writes that we should be ready to receive revelations from the world, rather than bringing one's own tools to decode it (18). In receiving revelations from the world, the environment acts on the thinking subject in

surprising ways. Ingold's conception of the work the world does when it imposes itself onto us (we who are immanent in that world anyway) is the crux of his argument for the collapse of subject-object relations.

What becomes possible when we look at art and analyze it not in order to figure out what it represents, but experience its affective quality? This is a question Ingold addresses in his argument for the affective capacity that presides in objects and forms in the environment. Regarding art, he writes that it "gives form to feeling... it is the shape that is taken by our perception of the world" (23). Pushing his example further, he writes that when we yell, the yell isn't a reference to our anger, it is our anger (24), "and if people pour out their being in the melodies of speech, so the waves pour out theirs in the sounds we describe as foaming and crashing," he writes (24). As a phenomenological anthropologist, Ingold privileges the affective capacity of objects and the environment over systematic conceptions of them. His work demonstrates that awareness of oneself in the world and of one's habits of sensory awareness are contingent upon ways one interacts with and conceptualizes one's relationship with the environment. As an example, the Koyukon of native Alaska use verbs and behavioral descriptions in the names they have for animals in the environment. The gnat is "it gnaws," butterfly is "flutters here and there," boreal owl is "perches in the lower part of spruce trees" (2011, 169). Seeing an animal, then, is not to behold an object, but to witness an act, and each animal is a manifestation of its movement (170). "Koyukon people... do not occupy a world of immobile and insensate objects; they inhabit a world of mobile and sensate beings, which are not only forever watching and being watched, but listening out for one another as well" (173). Speaking of an animal is an act of "entering into the process of its life" (175). When objects "go beyond nouns" (175),

they take on agency of their own. Ingold's suggestions are helpful for thinking through how subject-object relations can become disrupted from both an indigenous perspective and a phenomenological one.

Alberto Jiménez offers another example of the affective quality of objects. His analysis of *The Reverse of a Framed Painting*, by seventeenth-century Dutch artist Cornelius Gijssbrechts, addresses the agency of non-human material. *The Reverse of a Framed Painting* was often left somewhere in a room, either leaning on a wall or laying on the floor (2018, 57). What is represented is literally the back side of a canvas in a wooden frame. It is meant to draw viewers in and tempt them to turn it over. On the other side, the viewer would find the same thing, what looks like the back side of a framed painting. Jiménez calls this the beginning of non-representational painting, as the painting/object stands for nothing but itself (57). He goes on to explain that the viewer's "flipping compulsion" is an oscillation between a human-centered and an object-centered point of view (58-59). When the viewer realizes the would-be front side is actually the back side too, the viewer experiences a "blurring of epistemic registers" (59). The object is "a trap" that "cracks perspectivalism open". It "enraptures the body and leaves the gaze behind" (61).

"Object-oriented ontology" is a second school of thought in philosophy that attends to the life of objects, and while many thinkers have addressed similar concerns, Graham Harman is credited for positing the concept in his thesis, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Bryant 2013, xiii). The seminal texts in the discourse include Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*, Bryant's *Onticology*, Morton's *Dark Ecology*, and Harman's *Object-Oriented Philosophy*. OOO is an explicit alternative to anthropocentric philosophies of being, as emerged with Kant in the Copernican Revolution (Bogost 2012, 29). Kant's

Transcendental Idealism claims that being exists only for subjects, and such a view has rippled through philosophy to the present day (3). For example, George Berkeley's subjective idealism posits that "objects are just bundles of sense data in the minds of those who perceive them," (4). For Hegel, the world of objects is knowable only through the self-conscious mind, and for Derrida, meaning and identity are always deferred infinitely (4). In his *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux offered the term "correlationism" to describe how neo-Kantian philosophers conceive of objects. "Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another," writes Meillassoux (2009, 5); the object can never be known in itself, and it is always contingent on its relationship with the subject.

Speculative realism is an overarching term that encompasses OOO, and it emerged as a critique of correlationism, "[demonstrating] its quaintness of access" (Bogost 2012, 5). As opposed to the Neo-Kantians, OOO conceptualizes objects as "the center of being" (6). For OOO, nothing, not even humans, deserve "special status" among things; everything is but an object, including humans. OOO is premised on the ability of objects to withdraw from perception. One can never see the totality of an object, and thus, objects can never be comprehended in their entirety (Morton 2011, 165). Morton writes, "no matter how many times we turn over a coin, we never see the other side *as* the other side—it will have to flip onto "this" side for us to see it, immediately producing another underside" (165). Or, for example, Harman writes of a cricket match, where fifty-thousand fans watch, each from their own perspective, but the match remains but one singular event, in itself (2005, 26). Therefore, there is always an "irreducible darkness" around objects. We think we come to

know them, but we forget that there are always a million *other ways* they might be known. “The same object can manifest itself in countless different ways,” writes Harman (26).

Objects cannot be known only through their relationships with other objects, nor through human subjectivity. They manifest in different ways in themselves, like a burning barn around which one is bound to circle, continuously seeking novel perspective (Harman 2005, 78). With the advent of the Anthropocene, objects are more than ever “a box of surprises” (78). As an example, Morton writes of global warming as a “hyperobject” (2011, 176). It is withdrawn, one cannot “directly see or touch” it. “It affects all weather on Earth yet it’s not reducible to particular manifestations such as sunshine or rain. Instruments such as computers processing terabytes per second can see global warming—not human eyes. What is truly disturbing is that the wet stuff falling on my head is now a mere accident of some unseen substance. Nature has disappeared; no—we are realizing we never had it in the first place” (167). The project of OOO, to take seriously the affective capacity of non-human objects, is one that poses a threat to what Stengers calls “agents of modernization” (2018, 86).

In de la Cadena and Blaser’s edited volume, Stengers’ argument for the agency of the non-human, what she calls a “return to animism,” is situated in crises of the Anthropocene in Latin America. Environmental destruction is explicit and ubiquitous in that part of the world, and it takes the form of extractivism and the erasure of native land tenure (de La Cadena and Blaser 2018, 2). Extractivists are backed by governments and corporations who claim that mining, damming rivers for hydroelectric power, and other extractivist practices are good for the region because they catalyze economic growth and develop “backward” regions (2). “We hold that what is currently being destroyed is also other-than-

human persons because what extractivist and environmentalist practices enact as nature may be, *also*, other than such" (2). The editors' evidence for this is located in ethnographic material from the Peruvian Andes and Paraguay, where local people hold that the mountains and animals are spirit masters and persons (2).

The editors follow Latour's argument in *We Have Never Been Modern*, especially his critique of "the modern constitution" (1993, 104). The global West, with its cosmopolitan academic traditions and its unflagging trust in scientific knowledge, has a proclivity to objectivize and analyze the non-Western world as if the many epistemologies and ontologies that exist outside of the scope of science are only cultural beliefs (99). The scientist believes that their own knowledge is separated out from culture and at the same time, that "Chinese or Amerindian, Azande, or Barouya, cannot really separate what is knowledge from what is society, what is sign from what is thing, what comes from Nature versus what their Cultures require" (99). Latour draws attention to the fallacy of this dichotomy, arguing that all societies simultaneously construct the natural world (104). For Stengers, "agents of modernization" are "servants of the machine," who take as their project linear progress: out of animism, toward science and civilization, the development of backward regions, and resource extraction for economic means (2018, 86). Explaining the logic of agents of modernization, Stengers writes, "Animism equals regression; it is what we are committed to resist" (99).

Returning to animism means taking seriously the project of OOO. Latour's argument that all societies construct both nature and culture is related to the premise of OOO but doesn't relate it explicitly. "As soon as one accepts that there are multiple relations to the same things, and that neither animate nor inanimate objects are able to sound the depths of

their neighbors, the standpoint of object-oriented philosophy has already been established,” writes Harman (2005, 78). Like the burning barn or the cricket match, there are an indeterminate number of angles from which one might look on, sense, and perceive an event. The hyperobject called nature, too, emerges only in half-light. We sense only its partial and inchoate manifestations and mistake its parts for the inconceivable whole. The wholeness of objects can never be comprehended at once, they “withdraw” into their own wholeness and show us only part (Morton 2011, 166). Therefore, real objects exist (165), and every effort to know them will always fall short. Following Morton and Latour, all efforts to construct nature, whether through the culture of science or animism, can only illuminate it in part.

For political theorist Jane Bennett, the widely held Kantian assumption that non-human material/matter is “passive...raw, brute, or inert,” is a political claim that has ethical consequences. Extending the project of OOO, Bennet suggests that the material world has vitality. “By ‘vitality’ I mean the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own,” she writes (2010, viii). In other words, she holds that non-human material “can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (viii). She suggests that if we take seriously the vibrancy of things, human ethics and political analysis and practice will shift (viii). Her argument for the need for this shift is situated in the Anthropocene crisis. Human hubris that we can escape the material world, master nature, and remain unique “in the eyes of god,” is for Bennet, highly dangerous for the planet. The conceptualization of “dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and

our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption,” she writes (ix). Attuned perception toward “a fuller range” of the capacity of non-human materials to help or harm human activity for Bennet is indispensable to an ecologically stable world (ix).

Bennet’s political engagement with non-human matter carries the project of OOO into the realm of action and impediment. In *Vibrant Matter*, this is worked out through an engagement not only with the ontological status of the non-human, but an argument for the affective capacity of the non-human. Bennet suggests that when humans experience “sensuous enchantment” from the material world in everyday life, it is the material world that has the ability to produce affects such as “delight and disturbance” in the human subject (xi). Bennett calls this “motivational energy,” and suggests that it is just such energy that has the capacity to push humans from discursive engagements with political and ethical theory to “the actual practice of ethical behaviors” (xi). In other words, the material world is the master of human behavior and the catalyst for human action, not the other way around. She argues that in such a case “litter, rubbish, trash, or “the recycling,” can be conceptualized differently and viewed as alive, dangerous, and accumulating (viii).

Kathleen Stewart couches this ability of the non-human to produce affects in the human in cultural theory. She is concerned with “points of precision” and “atmospheric attunement,” which has to do with the inchoate ways that the material world makes itself known in flashes. She addresses the paradox that the material world is spectral because it is ubiquitous, which David Foster Wallace so aptly captured in his commencement speech to the 2005 graduating class of Kenyon college. “There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and

then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?" (Krajeski 2008).

"Every day, in perfectly ordinary moments, there's an activation of the details of something somehow at hand," Stewart writes (2011). What matters here are the affective thresholds of these moments; how the human apprehends the spectral world in fragments. Following Bennet, the effects of Kantian philosophy including the pre-eminence of human subjectivity, or, "the fantasy of human uniqueness" (Bennett 2010, ix), are certainly to blame for the non-recognition of vibrant matter. Therefore, the ubiquitous-yet-spectral paradox at work in the human's relationship with the material world can also be read as a symptom of the philosophical hegemony of the pre-eminence Bennet mentions. The point of precision, in Stewart's work, is the moment when the veil of our conception of material as inert cracks. In her essay of that name Stewart employs excerpts from *The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* and other literature to simulate moments when the veil breaks. "In the points of precision of any act or story, what matters is not, first, a meaning but the singularity of an angle of approach, a surprise contact, an opening onto some world's cocomposition, a groundswell of a thing that does not yet have a name thrown into a soft focus as a threshold... the momentary flourishing of some capacity," writes Stewart (2016, 43). She goes on to write that the point of precision is "a channel of improvisatory conceptuality," that lasts "long enough to create the disturbance in the field we call experience" (43). For Stewart humans aren't the only ones who write, and there isn't only one way to read the writing the world does.

The affective power of these disturbances in human experience are important for Stewart because they are the building blocks of worlds (2011, 445). She calls these

moments, “the charged rhythms of the ordinary,” “qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements,” “lived affects with tempos” (445-446). Stewart uses as an example the atmosphere that developed around the coal fields of West Virginia after Reagan was elected. There was an ensuing economic and social crisis. People were eating dogfood, living in their cars, and detritus of rough living accrued in the landscape and in the news (447). Reagan’s election set off a “worlding” that would gain momentum and set the people of West Virginia on a trajectory that could be read in the landscape, “amassed in floods of stories and in ruined objects that piled up... like an accrual of phantom limbs” (447). For Stewart, atmospheres aren’t created by non-human objects only, but they are certainly important. Atmospheres are created in “the sentience... of a worlding;” when heterogeneous elements (discourse, objects, subjects, groups) exist together “in a scene that bodies labor to be in or to get through” (452). Bodies try to find grounding, “to fall into step,” with the forces of the world as they find themselves awash in its momentum (452). Stewart’s work is a salient example of ethnography that palpates the world, rather than attaching labels or identities to it.

Stewart contributor’s to the project of OOO and fictocriticism by endeavoring first, to note the affective presence of materialities and atmospheres, and second, to deny positivism and write about worlds through poetry and literature. Her attention to atmospheres and the affective qualities of the world, which can never be pinned down, also carries forward the project of phenomenology. Writing about life worlds requires an acknowledgement that there is always an “irreducible dark side” to objects; that they are only ever partially knowable (Morton 2011, 166), and therefore, exist outside of human conceptions of them. The phenomenological currents in her work emerge in her

commitment to radical empiricism. She attempts to “[explore] the circumstances under which different modes of experience arise in the course of life,” rather than “trying to establish foundations for knowledge” in a positivistic sense (Jackson 1996, 25). Her writing carries forward the project of fictocriticism, as it moves and flows, miming atmospheres themselves, create what Jackson calls “narrative... [as] a form of Being as much as a way of Saying” (39).

Clearwater Season: Living Below



A Summer Path

(Ehringhaus 1988, 47)

Rainy Season. 2059. Entry 30.

Years ago, I watched the fourth of July fireworks from the dock in Oyster Creek. It extended from the end of the neighborhood, through the marsh, and to the fishermen's cottages on the canal. I laid down and reeds blocked out everything but the sky. There was hardly any light pollution on the island. Red blue green yellow fireworks filled the black. Their booming reverberated in the water around, and in the shallows beneath the dock. I was alone.

Everyone was in town, lining the docks and the restaurant porches. A band played, and I could hear drums feint in the distance. When the fireworks exploded, they threw colored light out over the marsh. In the flash I saw mud crabs scuttling. I smelled sulfur and mud. Before the end of the show I jumped on my bike and peddled fast toward town. The grand finale started as I turned onto main street. It sounded like a battlefield. Like a hundred cannons. White and red light flashed on my face, on the empty houses, and on the sailboats bobbing up and down in the bay. A crowd spilled onto the street. It moved toward me. Flags, painted faces, yelling, singing. Collective movement. I continued peddling and moved through the middle of the crowd toward the remains of the party. Smoke was in the air. Bodies moved past in slow motion. Little flags were strewn across the pavement. Under the lights body parts flashed under streetlamps, blurry and ephemeral, like under strobe lights at a party. At the end of the road it was quiet again, with nothing but the sound of distant shouts and sails clinking against masts on the night water.

Tonight, it is raining. I wonder if the dead are moving through the flooded street below. Underneath it must be quiet. Pale faces, breathless, moving in procession back toward the neighborhoods. I imagine everything must be blue and black. I can feel myself there. I hear the

current pulsing through suspended tree limbs, through open windows, the cracks between dock boards, past gravestones. I wonder if the buried are dry in their caskets. If the dead remain caught in the rubble, standing upright, playing make believe. I loved birdsong most of all. And the cool layer below sunbaked sand. The beach, empty in the heat of the afternoon. Crabs hardly visible in silt. The waves, aquamarine in July. Watermelon at the lifeguard stand. Endless paths through the pulsating maze. A shore, a life. Anything but this buried dream.

Rainy Season. 2059. Entry 32.

Residual carbon dioxide that would ordinarily be exhaled starts to accumulate in the body. Pneumothorax. Arterial gas embolism. When you surface too quickly, the bends. Itching, vomiting, fatigue, tinnitus, itching, fatigue, the choke.

Rainy Season. 2059. Entry 35.

I am at the bottom of sea. The animals are here. They are beautiful.

I finished the sacred text in a few months and began spending hours in the Village every day. Like Pelican, I made enough dives that I don't have to go down anymore. When the mustangs are with us, we rub salt on, and the Village appears. I can keep my eyes open and see the visions, and when the light starts to fade and my head goes black, I rub more salt on myself. Grandmother spent hours down there too, toward the end of her entries. I'm sitting in the old live oak on Springer's point as I write. The horses love the calm water on the sound side. A brown one, a "bay," is standing off from the herd. She is my favorite. I named her *carbon dioxide*. Something from the sacred text. Pelican doesn't know what it

means, but to me, it sounds like the essence of dryland. She's running away! A boat. It came close by the point and spooked the herd. Pelican told me to put salt on my lips. That way, if I go to a restaurant in the Village, I will taste the salt on my lips and be reminded not to eat anything. I almost choked on a handful of trash in the beginning. I stopped going to work. They asked me not to come anymore. They say that I stare into space for hours. I tell them, "I'm in the Village!" "What do you see?" they ask. If I were with them now, I would say, "The horse is coming back out from the forest. She is on the beach again. She is looking at me." I would sing the birdsong. I would hop around like the Green Heron so they could see him too. As I write, the fishermen are coming in for the evening, red crab pots in their boats. The last ferry blew its horn and entered the bay, leaving silence in its wake. The sun is lingering over the masts and sails, over the shops and hotels along front street. I'm walking to the Village now. A breeze blows in from the water and the music of wind chimes flows onto the street from porches. I don't want to mediate. I want to watch fireworks every night. I want to stay on Ocracoke with the horses. They're real. Running and running, hoof beats on sand, white brown and black mane in the wind, down thirteen-mile beach.

Afterword

The theories and forms of writing outlined above address the material and cultural problems of the Anthropocene from multiple angles. The social and cultural worlds that humans create have never been only human. They are built from and depend on non-human presences such as animals, plants, geological forms, weather, and other artifacts made from heterogenous materials “possessed of their own density and dynamism,” which cannot be reduced to human appropriation only (McLean 2017, ix). Material has a life of its own, outside of human conceptions of it, and in the Anthropocene such material is asserting itself explicitly.

Melting ice, rising temperature and oceans, rising carbon dioxide levels, nuclear waste, floating garbage, oil spills, and the extinction of species are a few ways in which this is happening (viii). Following de la Cadena and Blaser’s argument that we must resist the one-world cosmopolitical order, which does violence to non-Western ways of knowing and being and renders indigenous land *terra nullis* for extractivism, anthropology needs non-violent forms of writing and research that not only resist the one-world order, but pushes back against it. In doing so, Geertz’ suggestion that ethnography is always a “second or third order” iteration of first order experience is useful (1973, 15). Violent academic writing aims to make copies of the world, order disorder, and pretend that making a one-to-one copy of first order experience is possible. In doing so, it conceals its means of production (Taussig 2010, 29). Non-violent writing takes seriously Harman’s suggestion that there is always an “irreducible darkness” around material life, and that therefore, objects truly exist, but we can never know them fully (Harman 2005, 26). Following this

logic, Stewart writes that “If description is an approach to an ungraspable thing, it might begin by deliteralizing the properties and appearances of that thing, and then, in its very faithfulness to its object’s energetic, multiplicitous possibilities, it might find itself overwhelmed by an excess of surfaces, aspects, and remainders” (2016, 33). Taussig calls this unknowable but transmutable energy “mana” (2018, 194), and Bennet calls it “vibrancy” (2010, vii). As such, Latour’s suggestion that all cultures simultaneously construct nature makes sense (1993, 99). Scientists and animist apprehend nature equally; they both apprehend it in parts.

4.2 to 13.1 million people are at risk of sea level rise and “coastal inundation” by 2100 in just the United States (Haur et. al, 2019). In the present ecological emergency, when we speculate about possible connectedness with other beings, or about the earth void of humans, reality opens up to be refashioned, and Kantian conceptions of the separations between subjects and objects might collapse (Mclean 201, xi). This separation underpinned colonial and extractivist processes in the first place, making terra nullis of indigenous land and ontology (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 3). “Facing the imminent prospect of both disaster and discovery, we must not fall into despair, but rather strive to provide tangible interventions to shape and repair the worlds we still hope for” (Anderson et al, 2018). As an alternative, science fiction offers possibilities, potentialities, and simulations of and for other worlds (2018). It simulates alternative realities, and at the same time, illuminates the struggle and suffering in our present world. Now more than ever, we need alternative ways of being and being together. Anthropology, and especially ethnographic writing, might lead the way by pushing the limits of what is possible to think and to build.

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